

WEATHER THREATS PUT SCHOOLS AT RISK

Looking at summaries of severe storms in Texas (tornadoes, hail and wind), it is easy to see that they take place most often in the months of March, April and May, between the hours of 4 and 7 p.m. That places the maximum threat just at the end of the school day, and into after-school activities. Fortunately, most school buildings are well constructed. A thorough survey will almost always identify plenty of good shelter areas. Three difficult problems remain.

1. When weather warnings are issued near the end of the school day, many schools have to contend with parents arriving to pick up their children and take them home. Clearly this is a very dangerous practice, since children are much safer in a school building than they are driving home in an automobile.

2. On the outside, bands, pep squads, athletic teams and other school-oriented groups are frequently involved in afternoon or evening practices or games at a considerable distance from a good shelter. Here one of the greatest threats is lightning, made worse by the fact that even weak thunderstorms can produce deadly lightning—it doesn't take a severe thunderstorm. Furthermore, the lightning can strike several miles from its parent storm, and can be carried a considerable distance along wet ground. So, outdoor groups need to pay extra attention to the lightning threat and allow plenty of time to move to a safe indoor location. If a large audience is watching the outdoor event, it will take even more time to move people to safety.

3. Finally, one of the greatest

dangers is faced by the bus driver. This individual must travel through threatening weather in an extremely high-profile vehicle, and be prepared to deal with the severe weather. At the same time, they must maintain control of as many as 50 to 70 student riders. If confronted by a tornado, the safest action is to evacuate students into a nearby well-built building, if possible. If no such shelter is available, the driver should stop the bus, and have the students "duck and cover" in a low area away from the vehicle to minimize the chance of being hit by flying debris. Since many tornadic storms also bring heavy rain and flash flooding, everyone must stay alert to the danger of flash flooding and lightning. In many tornadic situations, drivers will be faced with only poor choices for shelter, but training can help them recognize key signs of impending severe weather and help them make the best safety decisions.

In fact, training is the best option in improving outdoor safety. Coaching staffs, band instructors and group advisors can be given basic weather safety training in an hour's time that will provide them with a much better understanding of the problem and ability to react quickly and more effectively to the threat. Maintenance and custodial personnel often work outside the building. They can be given basic spotter training that will offer the school an extra set of eyes to help follow developing severe weather.

Once the staff is trained, schools need to keep and monitor a reliable source of weather information, and that should include NOAA Weather Radio. New weather radios are now available that can be "customized". This limits radio alarms to just the county in which the school is located. Up to 14 additional counties may be added if desired.

